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Reaching new heights

First Person: Church blessed by Lottie Moon offering results

By Doug Broome
Pastor, First Church, Natchez

(Note: Broome is chairman of the Executive Committee of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board. Following is a narrative in which Broome shares the church's story of how it met and exceeded their 2013 offering goal. The story has been edited.)

During the initial meeting of the Executive Committee of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board in December 2013, Jim Futral presented a devotion that highlighted the Lottie Moon Offering for International Missions. In his remarks, he made reference to the efforts devoted to reaching a goal of \$100,000 while serving as pastor of Broadmoor Church, Madison. As he spoke, I sensed the Lord encouraging me to give greater emphasis to this special offering through my role as pastor of First Church, Natchez. While First Church, Natchez has always empha-



LOTTIE'S TRUNK – Doug Broome, pastor, First Church, Natchez, is shown with "Lottie's Trunk," an old steamer trunk similar to what Lottie Moon might have used to transport her belongings to China. Money given toward the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions is placed in this trunk during the offering emphasis. A church member shared her trunk for this purpose. (Photo by Tony Martin)

sized missions, I sensed that we could reach new heights in giving if I challenged our members to do more than they ever had before.

Upon returning to Natchez, I met with a man who graciously agreed to provide matching funds for every dollar that was given through

our church for the 2013 Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. After receiving assurance

see OFFERING on p. 8

HRC loses Arkansas vote, vows to fight on

FAYETTEVILLE, Ar. (BP and local reports) – The agenda of a sister group to the one spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to convince Mississippians that LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) people are "All God's Children" was dealt a serious blow when voters in a northwest Arkansas city overturned a pro-LGBT ordinance that many claimed posed a threat to religious liberty.

Residents of Fayetteville in a special election Dec. 9 approved repeal of the measure by fewer than 500 votes, with 52% of ballots in favor of repeal. The result rescinded a law passed by the city council in a 6-2 vote in August. Opponents of the ordinance collected enough signatures within a month to place its repeal on a special election ballot.

According to the Northwest Arkansas Times, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the country's largest political organization that promotes LGBT rights, provided Keep Fayetteville Fair, a committee opposing repeal,

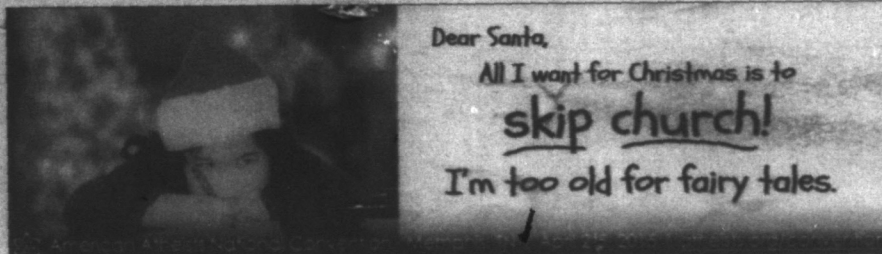
see HRC on p. 9

Atheist billboards refused by Jackson companies

NASHVILLE (BP) – Holiday billboards sponsored by an atheist group that call the Christmas story a fairy tale are indirect evidence of the "continuing cultural strength of Christianity" in the view of a Southern Baptist apologist.

Atheists "feel that they need to do this sort of thing to mark themselves out as brave and distinct," Mark Coppenger, professor of Christian apologetics at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Ky., told Baptist Press. "If Christmas had just been watered down to nothing, if there was no longer something of a theistic consensus in America, then I think they would find these billboards pointless."

Beginning Dec. 1, the New Jersey-based American Atheists sponsored billboards in Memphis, Nashville, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Fort Smith, Ark., fea-



turing a picture of a young girl with the caption, "Dear Santa, All I want for Christmas is to skip church! I'm too old for fairy tales." The bottom of the billboard has information about the American Atheists' national convention in April.

The Milwaukee billboard is co-sponsored by the Southwest Wis-

consin Freethinkers, according to a press release from the American Atheists. The atheist group said it was unable to secure a similar billboard in Jackson, Ms., because billboard companies rejected the content of the sign.

The billboards are located in residential areas near schools and churches in order to target

"in-the-closet atheists who are pressured to observe religious traditions during the holidays," according to the American Atheists press release.

"Even children know churches spew absurdity, which is why they don't want to attend services,"

see BILLBOARDS on p. 9

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From the editor

WILLIAM PERKINS

We're strange?

Christmas has morphed into many things in the past 2,000 years. From what started as the birth of an eternal Savior in a simple barn surrounded by some of God's lower creations, we have arrived at the point where celebrity-endorsed shoes and junk jewelry have crowded out the significance of the original message.

It's always been a remarkable sight to see adults, otherwise well-socialized, jostling and threatening each other outside a store at 3 a.m. on Black Friday while waiting to buy fancy underwear on sale. With people on the other side of the world being beheaded by the thousands and whole countries struggling to contain the greatest infectious threat to the human race since The Plague, it would appear our priorities are somewhat misplaced — to put it politely.

The proverbial camel, which has had his nose in the tent for some time, is now all the way inside. Many retail giants announced this year they would open for business late on Thanksgiving Day. Not to be outdone, other retailers doubled down by opening before dawn on Thanksgiving Day.

Thanksgiving Day, like Sundays in this country, has become just another 24 hours on an endless shopping calendar. Look for Christmas Day to soon suffer the same fate. When that happens, the stripping away of all things spiritual in America will be virtually complete.

That is, the stripping away of all things Christian. Islam will still be welcomed and practiced in public schools. Planned Parenthood will still be able to teach young children how to overcome their natural modesty, and what to do when that results in an unplanned pregnancy. Grown men will be still allowed to use women's bathrooms and locker rooms because he (she?) is really a woman on the inside.

Funny how the Christians-haters believe we're the strange ones, huh? We're the ones who keep people from being truly free. Our beliefs and traditions are a threat to the civilized world. We are denied a National Day of Prayer by federal judges, while Muslims are invited to The White House for Iftar. Our gatherings are dangerous, while anarchists are allowed to roam the streets creating bedlam.

At this Christmas 2014, the world is truly upside down (Romans 1:20-22). America is truly upside down. What can we do? Pray, give, and go. Our most powerful tool as Christians is to pray. Secondly, for the billions of people who need to hear the Gospel, we must give so the people God has called can go tell them. Finally, we must go ourselves.

With that formula, we can help win Mississippi and the world to Jesus. Let's pledge to make 2015 the year that happens.

No issue on Dec. 25

Due to postal regulations that limit The Baptist Record to fifty issues per year, the newspaper does not publish the weeks of Independence Day and Christmas Day. There will therefore be no issue of Dec. 25. The next issue of the Record will be dated Jan. 1, and delivery of that issue will be delayed because of the New Year's Day holiday. The newspaper will resume regularly-scheduled delivery with the issue of January 8.

The staff of The Baptist Record thanks you for your support of this ministry of information, and wishes for you and your family a very meaningful observance of the birth of our Lord and Savior, and a Happy New Year.

Billions need to hear Gospel

RICHMOND, Va. (BP) — Imagine over 6,000 people groups spanning billions of individual people who have yet to even hear that God loves them. Some of them have never even heard the name of Jesus.

Meanwhile, Jesus has given us, as His followers, a clear command: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20, HCSB).

We call this command the Great Commission and the Gospel the "good news" of what God has done in Christ. We owe this Gospel to the world. As Paul said in Romans 1:14, we are "obligated" to tell the nations this good news. Believers this side of heaven owe the Gospel to lost men and women this side of hell.

Do we really believe Jesus was serious in His commission to us? Do our actions, our decisions, our use of resources, and our lives show that we are serious about getting the Gospel to people who have never heard it?

"The Gospel is only good news if it gets there in time," Christian theologian Carl Henry said.

In order to get the Gospel to people all over the planet on time, the International Mission Board (IMB) is focused on exalting Christ, mobilizing Christians, serving the church, and completing the Great Commission.

Exalting Christ

More than anything else, we want to exalt Jesus Christ in everything we say, think, and do. Jesus must be at the center of any mission strategy. After all, the beauty of the Great Commission is that Christ promises to be the One who will accomplish this mission through us. "Remember," He said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20, HCSB).

We exalt Christ when we trust His Word. God's Word is the authority for what we believe and how we operate. Our aim in missions is not to come up with plans and ask God to bless them, but to align with the plan He has already promised to bless. That plan is to make disciples and multiply churches in all nations, and we exalt Christ when we obey His plan.



Guest opinion with David Platt

More than we want our own lives, we want the glory of Christ among all nations. We're captivated by a vision of Him high and lifted up, receiving the praise He is due from all the peoples of the earth. His exaltation is what drives us in our mission.

Mobilizing Christians

In order to exalt Christ, we must see our lives as uniquely designed and ultimately blessed for this purpose. The reason why we have breath, and the reason why we have the Gospel, is to make His grace and His glory known to the ends of the earth. That means that global mission is not a compartmentalized program in the church for a select few who are called to that. Instead, global mission is the purpose for which each one of us was created.

Throughout the history of IMB, 20,000 missionaries have been sent out and we praise God for that, but we need 20,000 right now and our task is too great not to be thinking like that. Such thinking is not idealistic. It's imperative.

IMB desires to help followers of Christ with different skills and gifts, in different locations, with different jobs, all realizing that we have a role to play in the global mission of God.

Serving the church

Biblically, the local church is the agent that God is going to use to accomplish the Great Commission. Therefore, our role at the IMB is to come alongside local churches to equip, encourage, and empower local churches to complete this global task. We believe pastors are the primary global missions strategists — pastors who know they are created for this global mission and who will lead their church for the sake of global

see PLATT on p. 9

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NEW NET — Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee staff leaders were in attendance with mission and vision team members of the Hispanic Leadership Network at the announcement of the network on Dec. 2 in Nashville. Present were (back row, left to right) Bob Sena, Daniel Sanchez, Ana Melendez, Guillermo Soriano, Luis Lopez, (front row, left to right) Ken Weathersby, Frank Page, Rolando Castro, Fernando Amaro, and Victor Rios. (BP photo)

SBC to initiate network to expand Hispanic voice

NASHVILLE (BP) — Hispanics are strengthening their unity and cooperation within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) by forming a leadership network set to launch at the 2015 SBC annual meeting in Columbus, Oh.

SBC Hispanic relations consultant Bob Sena announced the network in cooperation with Luis Lopez, director of LifeWay Espanol church resources, at a December 2 dinner meeting in Nashville attended by 65 leaders including SBC Executive Committee CEO Frank S. Page and Hispanics from 23 Baptist state conventions.

Unity and communication among Hispanic Southern Baptists are essential to fulfilling the Great Commission, Sena said. "Without God's intervention, and all of us, every one of us, working together, we will miss this strategic moment in history to impact the Hispanic world that is in such dire need of the Gospel and of Jesus Christ."

"Let us unite around the Great Commission. Let us unite around prayer and remember, together we do more than by ourselves."

Sena appointed a five-member "mission and vision" team to organize the network for unveiling at Avance Hispano, the Hispanic gathering scheduled to meet during next year's June 16-17 annual meeting in Columbus.

"This committee will work and finalize what it's going to do, how we're going to develop a strategy, and then at the AVANCE meeting at the Southern Baptist Convention they will be announcing the steps that they have taken," Sena said.

"They'll present us with information so that then we can right there officially, even more officially than today, launch the network that will help us to connect and to communicate with Hispanics around the country — and how interesting would it be if this became a worldwide connection?"

Guillermo Soriano, consultant for Hispanic evangelism and discipleship with North Carolina Baptists, will serve as mission and vision team facilitator. Joining Soriano are team members:

■ Fernando Amaro, Hispanic ministries facilitator of the Arizona Baptist Convention.

■ Rolando Castro, missionary for church planting/evangelism, language churches, and Hispanic church development, Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware.

■ Ana Melendez, a member of Cristo Es Rey Baptist Church, Bolingbrook, Ill., affiliated with the Illinois State Baptist Association.

■ Victor Rios, president of the Association of Hispanic Baptist Churches of New York/New Jersey.

Page, who pledged to appoint an Hispanic Advisory Council within one day of his employment as Executive Committee president in 2010, encouraged Hispanics to become increasingly involved in SBC life.

"I'm excited about the days ahead, because I believe the work of Hispanic and Latino churches in our convention is going to take a whole new level of importance and involvement, and that's one of my big concerns that Hispanic churches not be seen as a fringe element. I urge you to step up to

the plate to get involved, to be involved, and I encourage you in that and I thank God that we are partners together in the work of the Gospel."

The Hispanic and Latino population is the largest of all ethnic groups within the U.S., Page said, and is projected to outnumber Anglos by the year 2050. Page encouraged all Southern Baptists to be "pure in heart."

"In the Hispanic culture, we need leaders who will be pure in heart, so that when the people see you, they know there is no agenda, other than the agenda of Jesus Christ and when they see me, they need to know there is no agenda other than that of Jesus Christ," Page said, encouraging pure hearts as Jesus emphasized in Matt. 5:8.

"When Hispanics and Anglos and African Americans see leaders with that kind of heart, there will be unity. There will be a revival when they see a purity in heart. He did not say blessed are the perfect. He said blessed are the pure in heart."

Sena affirmed Page as a man of his word, and also thanked Ken Weathersby, SBC Executive Committee vice president for convention advancement, for his leadership.

"I'm so grateful to both of my leaders, to Frank Page and to Ken Weathersby. I can tell you from experience that I wouldn't be at this place or having accepted the responsibility as Hispanic consultant for the Executive Committee, if I didn't believe that Dr. Frank Page was a man of his word... I have not seen one thing that has been an indicator of his not honoring his word."

Satanists setting up 'Christmas' display in Florida capital

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (BP) — A Satanist holiday display scheduled for exhibition this Christmas in the Florida state capitol rotunda is a spiritual danger that could literally cost someone their eternal soul, a Southern Baptist pastor who was involved in Satanism before his conversion told Baptist Press (BP).

The display, which depicts an angel doll falling from clouds made of cotton into flames made of construction paper, "is bringing religion down" and "saying, 'Anything can be a religion,'" Gwan Garrison, pastor of Franklin Church in Bainbridge, Ga., said. Garrison also works as special projects coordinator for nearby Leon County, Fla., where the capitol building in Tallahassee is located.

Sponsored by a group called the Satanic Temple, the controversial holiday display will appear Dec. 22-29 in an area of the capitol designated as an open forum for private speech, the Washington Post reported.

The display includes the greeting, "Happy holidays from the Satanic Temple," and the words of Isaiah 14:12, which many Bible scholars believe describes the fall of Satan from heaven.

Last year, Florida officials rejected a similar display proposed by the New York-based Satanic Temple as "grossly offensive during the holiday season," but granted approval for this year's display following threats of legal action, the Post reported.

Among other displays approved this Christmas are a banner from the Freedom From Religion Foundation and multiple nativity scenes, the Tampa Tribune reported. Past holiday displays have included a six-foot "Festivus Pole" made of beer cans and inspired by a made-up holiday from the television show

Seinfeld and a "Pastafarian Flying Spaghetti Monster."

Earlier this year, the Satanic Temple proposed to erect a seven-foot statue of Satan interacting with children at the Oklahoma state capitol. At the request of Oklahoma's attorney general, a moratorium has been placed on new monuments at the capitol including the Satan statue while a lawsuit concerning a Ten Commandments monument is adjudicated, a capitol spokesman told BP.

The Satanic Temple does not literally worship Satan but uses Satan as a symbol for its belief in "rational inquiry removed from super-naturalism and archaic tradition-based superstitions," the Post reported.

Garrison explained that Satanists generally do not worship Satan like Christians worship of God. Instead, they reject God's authority and at times seek to harness Satan's power to fulfill their own desires. Garrison acquired satanic paraphernalia and attempted to cast spells before experiencing salvation at an Easter drama in 1994.

"I disregard this demonstration, and I don't feel that it has a place there," Garrison, who works two blocks from the Florida capitol, said of the upcoming display.

The Satanist holiday scene poses a spiritual danger because it could make non-Christians feel secure in their lost condition by "giving acceptance to the rejection of Jesus Christ," Garrison said. "That's the true dastardly deed that's being done here."

In the end, though, believers must realize that while Satan is powerful, he cannot do anything without God's permission, Garrison said. "The power of Satan is real, but the power of Jesus is ultimate," he said.

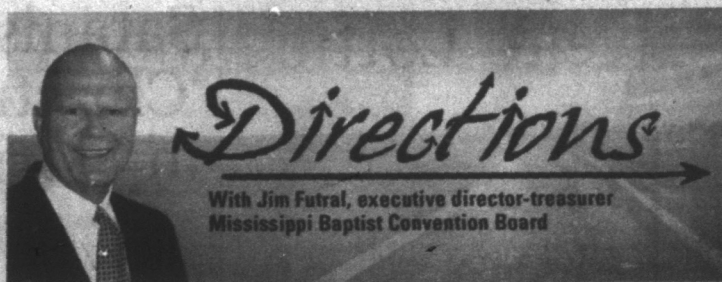


This month my wife, Shirley, and I will celebrate 50 years of marriage. It's strange how a half of century can seem like yesterday, but it does. We were kids in college. Over five decades ago I asked her dad for his blessings for me to marry his daughter. He said, "Can you support her?" I said, "Yes, sir. I'm pastor of a church." It did not seem all that important to add that they paid me \$35 a week, but I thought we could make it. Her father went on and gave me his blessings. So in December of 1964, Shirley and I said, "I do." Neither one of us fully understanding what we were saying "I do" to or what we were supposed to do when we said "I do." We did know that we loved each other and that we shared a common heart for loving the Lord and a common goal of wanting to serve Him.

With friends and family gathered on a cold winter night at her home church, in the beauty of Christmas decorations and with the wonder and amazement of the life ahead for us, we were married. Now, after all these years, I feel like a dear old man who was in our church some years ago. I met him and his wife coming down the hall one Sunday. They were holding hands, shuffling along. I stopped them and visited with them a moment and then I said as they stood there hand in hand, "How long have y'all been married?" She said nothing. He kind of looked toward her and rolled his eyes upward as though he was looking for an answer and then he said, "Preacher, I don't know. I can't remember if I was born first or married first."

Important dates in life kind of run together. It has been wonderful. While there was a lot that we did not know and much that we still do not know, one thing we have learned and re-learned is that marriage is not just an event, it is a journey. And my, what a journey it has been. It has covered over 18,250 days, but in those days we've covered somewhere over 3 million miles. It has been an incredible trip, one day at a time. But like any journey this one falls into three parts.

If you're going on a journey somewhere for a day or a month, there needs to be some preparation and preparations are not easy. Being prepared is just doing the best you can to be ready for whatever might happen. You won't ever cover everything, but you can try and we did try to prepare for life. A couple of years after we married, we graduated together from Blue Mountain College. While many people may have doubted that young couple would indeed go on and finish college, we did with determination and the help of folks around us who wanted us to do our best and



The Journey of a Lifetime – Or At Least Almost a Lifetime

be our best. Then we simply continued working. She was prepared to teach school and I continued to preach at our church. Together we tried to pastor a wonderful group of folks.

Somewhere early on we learned that this preparation thing continues. She was preparing for class and grading papers and calling parents, doing all of the things that a schoolteacher does. I was preparing sermons and making visits and trying to do all that I was supposed to do as a young pastor of a church. We were always preparing and now after 50 years of preparing for this journey of life, we're still preparing. Now, though she is not preparing to go and teach every day, she stays in preparation mode getting ready to do something for one grandchild or another or go to one of their activities for another or answer a question or just delight in being with those kids. And while I'm not blessed to be the pastor of a church at the present, I continue to stay busy preparing for the next speaking engagement or the next meeting or making another call or writing another letter or article. We still keep preparing because the journey continues to unfold.

When you take a journey it involves preparation but it also quickly involves reflections. A couple of days or a couple of years into the journey and you begin to reflect on where you've been and what has happened and the people you've met. Not always, but more often than not, the reflections are on good things. Sure, on the journey there have been bumps in the road, detours, a few wrecks, but much more than any of those things have been the glorious sunrises and sunsets and the beauty of landscape that rises before you and looks over a hill at beautiful valleys, rivers and streams, wildlife and snows and rains,

floods and winds. They've all been there along the journey, and so many wonderful things to remember, beautiful reflections of life. I suppose above all of the reflections we hold dear are the characters who we've had the privilege to know.

In the churches where I have been pastor, we've known some absolutely wonderful people, men and women, young people, little children, precious aging saints. All along the journey we've picked them up in our hearts and have taken them with us. In my thoughts right now I can see them and name them. Some of them have gone on to be with the Lord, but so many of them are still alive and vibrant, not only in our memory but in our existence. They, one after another, bless our lives and our home and continue to do so even today.

As we were on the journey and as we reflect on what took place, the most significant impact on our home was three wonderful kids that the Lord allowed us to have in our home, Melodi, Rob, and Mysti. They were and still are truly a gift of God. We thought as we picked them up from the hospital one by one that they would be there forever, but on reflection, they didn't stay very long. Each of them hung around just long enough to learn to tie their shoes, dress themselves, read and write, use some manners and off they went on a journey of their own. These three youngins who joined us on the journey, provided for us an unending stream of joy and challenges and triumphs and questions and moments of amazement that continue to this very day. Their journeys involved them introducing us to their travel partners: Tim, Kimandria, and Philip. They are all still around and are in and out of our lives on a frequent

basis. Everybody is on a journey that is meaningful and guided by God.

When it comes to reflections, none is probably equal to the next invasion of people into our hearts as we have been blessed with eight grandchildren: Madi, Trea, Ridge, Rivers, Banks, Coleman, Mary Lamar, and Clay. What a blessing we have enjoyed, seeing and being with these bright, gifted, cheerful children, who unlike their parents sometimes have never been disobedient, are never in a bad mood, are always loving and kind toward us and toward each other. Well, almost all the time. They have blessed us. They have brought buckets of blessings to our lives.

The last part of a journey, that journey that involved preparations and reflections and other contemplations, lessons learned or acquired, just a couple of things that I would contemplate about this whole 50 year journey. **First, that each day should be treated as a treasure from God.** The day may be filled with decisions or difficulties or delights, but still it is a treasure God has given you and me. There are no do-overs in life, no repeat days; it is a one way street. You and I have the privilege of deciding what we're going to make out of it, how we're going to treat others, the attitude we're going to have in life, what we will attempt to accomplish, or the things we fail to do. Each day is a special gift from the Heavenly Father. **The other contemplated thing that comes to my mind is for those of us who know the Lord this life is not the only life.** In fact, the Scripture promises us that we can't even imagine what the world is going to be like that we're going to be in. "But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor. 2:9).

But for now, to that young lady who I invited to go on this journey with me, I can only say thank you. You said "I do" and you did in sickness, in health, in poverty or wealth, good days and not so good, you have been a wonderful companion on the journey. You've carried a load too big, worked too hard and too long, and put up with me with my crazy ways and in my bad days only to get up and join me on the journey down the road of another day. It has been magnificent and today I invite you to join me on setting out on an adventure of life as we begin another 50 year journey.

Love, Jim

The author can be contacted at directions@mbcb.org.

College News

WILLIAM CAREY UNIVERSITY received an Environmental Excellence Award and a certificate of energy savings of \$405,000 from Cennergistic, WCU's partner in an ongoing energy conservation program, on December 11. WCU has been involved in the program for 30 months and has appointed Assistant Men's Basketball Coach Scotty Fletcher as energy specialist to coordinate the conservation efforts. Pictured with the award and certificate are (left to right) Tommy King, WCU president; Fletcher; and James Hutto, marketing consultant for Cennergistic.



Staff Changes

► **Yale Street Church, Cleveland,** has called Gabby Hays as pastor.

Revivals

► **Hathorn Church, Columbia:** Bible revival, Dec. 28 – 30; Sun., 11 a.m.; Mon. – Tues., 7 p.m.; James Messer, speaker; Duke and Linda Barnes, worship leaders.

Missionaries give to Lottie Moon Offering, too

PUNTA CANA, Dominican Republic (BP) — Facing what some called a God-sized challenge, a group of International Mission Board (IMB) missionaries far exceeded their offering goal of \$100,000 for international missions.

A total of \$277,218 was collected at a gathering of 240 IMB families serving among American people groups around the world. Of the total, \$125,000 came from outside donations while \$152,217.92 came from IMB missionaries.

The amount given to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions is unprecedented, said David Steverson, IMB vice president for finance. He described it as the largest offering ever received from a single gathering of IMB missionaries in the organization's 169-year history.

Understanding that discretionary income for missionaries is limited, Lassiter said such a lofty goal might generate some doubt. Reaching the \$100,000 goal meant each family would need to give an average of \$416, nearly 20% of one month's base salary for an IMB career couple.

"That way," Lassiter said, "if (the goal) was met, people would know God moved."

Although Lassiter expected skepticism, he became concerned that the goal would not be met when he received little response to the monthly podcast in which he presented the goal. "I started doubting a bit," he admitted.

Some of the missionaries under Lassiter's leadership did, too. "How can a group of ordinary missionaries collect this much money in a time of budget cuts?" some asked. Others applauded

Lassiter's vision and considered \$100,000 to be an attainable goal.

A few weeks before the July meeting, a few missionaries began donating, but amounts were small. Elliott Baze (not his real name), IMB director of finance for the Americas, described the giving as "an initial flurry of donations followed by a slow but steady march upward." Lassiter was getting worried.

Then came the conference and daily messages about how God accomplished his purposes through ordinary people without much to offer. "You could feel the energy of the group build on itself," Baze recalled. "The offering gained momentum as the meeting unfolded."

That momentum only continued to grow when the group learned that an anonymous donor was willing to match the goal with a \$100,000 gift, if it was reached. Another outside donor committed an additional \$25,000.

Then, Baze said, the group "blew past the goal," and excitement grew.

To fuel the missionaries' enthusiasm, John Brady, IMB vice president for global strategy, offered to shave his head if the offering reached \$225,000. Steverson followed suit, also offering to shave his head if the offering reached \$250,000.

"I figure my hair is worth a quarter of a million dollars," Steverson said with a grin.

The missionaries said while the head-shaving stunts were fun and increased excitement, the offering was really about getting the Gospel to every language, people, tribe, and nation.

At the conference, missionaries had the opportunity to give their money with the same "heartfelt passion" with which they had given their lives for this cause years before, Baze said.

For Marty Childers, who serves



KEEPING HIS PROMISE — John Brady, International Mission Board (IMB) vice president for global strategy, laughs as his head is shaved in response to \$225,000 in gifts to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for international missions at a gathering in the Dominican Republic of IMB missionaries serving among American people groups. (BP photo courtesy of IMB)

in Mexico, an experience three weeks before the gathering cemented his desire to give 20 percent beyond the amount he initially planned to give.

"I had the privilege of being among a people group of about 100,000 people with less than 75 Christ followers," Childers said. "I met with a group of five of them, and we talked about sharing their faith."

With tears in his eyes, one of the leaders of the small house group said to Childers, "We want to reach our people, but we don't know how. Can you teach us?"

As Childers gave his offering, he remembered this conversation, realizing his gifts could help send more teachers and trainers to the more than 3,000 unengaged, unreached people groups around the world. This firsthand awareness prompted him to give more.

"If field workers do not give sacrificially, how can we expect

our SBC constituency to do the same?" said Tim Kunkel, who serves in Paraguay.

IMB's 2014 goal for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering is \$175 million.

In 2013, Southern Baptists gave an unprecedented \$154 million, breaking the record for the largest total in the offering's 125-year history. While this was good news for the more than 4,800 IMB missionaries worldwide who depend on the offering to fund their work, an additional \$21 million will still be needed to reach this year's goal.

If the 16 million people purported to make up the Southern Baptist Convention will give just \$10.93 each, the \$175 million goal can easily be reached, Kunkel said. While American families spend about \$750 on Christmas, most Southern Baptist churches base their missions giving goal on an average gift of \$10 per person.

"If we can show that missionaries are leading the way in sacrificial giving, might this not spark a change?" Kunkel asked. "This is what we are hoping for."

In the final tally, IMB missionaries in the Americas gave \$152,217.92 and anonymous donors gave \$125,000. On average, each IMB family gave more than \$630 — nearly 30% of one month's base salary — to the offering. The total amount, \$277,217.92, will support five missionaries for a year.

BIBL i O C I P H E R

ERN TIDW XG ZIIW, L GEDICZ RITW XC

ERN WLP IA EDIJYTN; LCW RN VCIKNER

ERNH ERLE EDJGE XC RXH.

CLRJH ICN: GNMNC

Clue: $X = I$

Have fun with cryptography and exercise your Bible knowledge. A King James Version Bible verse has been encoded by letter substitution. The same letter is substituted throughout the puzzle. Solve by trial and error. Answer to last week's puzzle: John One: Thirty-six

By Charles Marx, 1932-2004, © 2005

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Simply share the following prayer with God in your own words:

1. Lord, I admit that I need you. (I have sinned.)

2. I want forgiveness for my sins and freedom from eternal death. (I repent.)

3. I believe Jesus died and rose from the grave to forgive my sins and to restore my relationship with you. (I believe in Jesus.)

4. By faith, I invite Jesus Christ into my life. From this time on, I want to live in a loving relationship with Him. (I receive Christ as my Savior and Lord.)

But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name." (John 1:12)

If you make a decision for Christ today, contact a local Southern Baptist church for spiritual guidance.

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Just for the Record



HICKORY GROVE CHURCH, LAMAR ASSOCIATION, enjoyed a fall festival with food, games, and activities for all ages.



GOOD HOPE CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA, recently licensed Clay Winstead to preach. Also shown are deacon chairman Oliver Jolly, and pastor Dudley Winstead (Clay's father.)



The children's group at **ARLINGTON CHURCH, BOGUE CHITTO**, presented *The Light Has Come* Dec. 7, directed by Patricia Russell. Matthew Green, pastor.



CAIRO CHURCH, ECRU, WOM held their Christmas party Dec. 6. Shown are the participants.



The children of **NEW BETHEL CHURCH, CARROLL COUNTY**, presented a play, *The Christmas Gift*, Dec. 7, which was followed by a congregational meal and storytime led by Melanie Shelton.



The Women's Ministry of **FRIENDSHIP CHURCH, ABERDEEN**, used their December meeting to make fruit baskets to give to the shut-in's and homebound of the church.

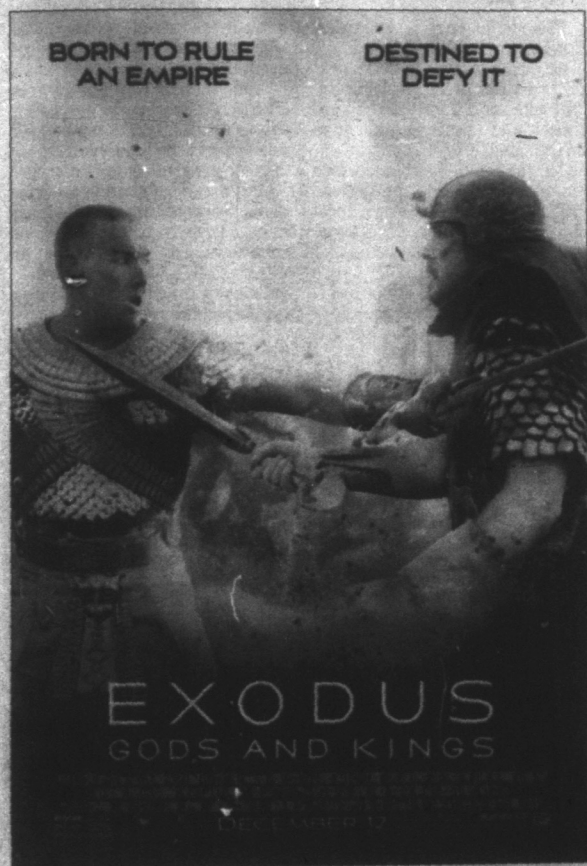


TYLERTOWN CHURCH, TYLERTOWN, ordained Chad Luter and Landon Wilson as deacons Dec. 7. Shown are Luter, pastor Justin Knight, and Wilson.



UNION HALL CHURCH, BROOKHAVEN, held their Christmas cantata recently

Review: 'Exodus' more cartoonish than biblical



By Phil Boatwright
Correspondent

According to the Hollywood Reporter, actor Christian Bale has said of Moses, "I think the man was likely schizophrenic and was one of the most barbaric individuals that I ever read about in my life."



BOATWRIGHT

This on the completion of his new film, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, wherein Oscar winner Bale played the man who led the Jews out of bondage and into the Promised Land.

Having seen the epic and special effects-laden story of Moses, I can assure you that what you see in the theatrical trailer is what you get in the film — one enormous computer-generated imagery (CGI) spectacle after another.

Defiance, battles, and slow-motion splattering of blood are also plenteous in the film that opened Dec. 12. What there is little of is the true nature of the biblical story and the man Bale calls schizophrenic.

In the 20th Century Fox production, Moses is equal

parts Streetcar Named Desire's Stanley Kowalski and General Patton. Bale portrays Moses more as a military figure than humble messenger of God, and God is played by a little boy in a silly artistic choice done possibly to take from the Almighty His majesty.

This rather jaundiced view of Bible heroes may be a trend in upcoming screen versions of biblical stories. There just doesn't seem to be a shortage of men in Hollywood who like to borrow from the Bible, yet don't believe a word of it.

From viewing any commercial for *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, one gets the distinct and sadly correct impression that this screen version is mainly about battle and spectacle. It's not about the power of God, nor one man's faith in his Creator. It's about power-mad men, and CGI.

To be sure, audiences looking mainly for spectacle will get their money's worth in the \$140 million production. Unfortunately, when the film gives pause for narrative, those in charge seem bent more on questioning faith in God than reaffirming it. This is a film determined not to emphasize the majesty and authority of God, but merely to paint Him as a petulant schoolyard bully.

Director Ridley Scott has

previously declared his disdain for organized religion, and while he has used biblical themes in several movies, often he seems to be preaching from a myopic mindset bent on discrediting biblical teachings.

Too often there comes a point in an artist's career when he feels invincible and unthreatened by the Creator. He shows not even the slightest politically correct sensitivities for those who embrace religious convictions. It's difficult enough to bring spiritual matters to the motion picture screen, but much more difficult when the filmmakers lack a spiritual connection.

When a filmmaker takes on a biblical story allowing such skepticism to become the thrust of his movie, he does so with an agenda. What audiences are left with is a vibrant but shallow screen adaptation that's more Marvel magazine than Old Testament Scripture.

Editor's note: In addition to writing for Baptist Press, Phil Boatwright reviews films for www.previewonline.org and is a regular contributor to The World and Everything In It, a weekly radio program from WORLD News Group. His review appears courtesy of Baptist Press. Edited for length.

Just for the Record



The women of **CALVARY CHURCH, VICKSBURG**, gathered for their annual Christmas party.



BETHLEHEM CHURCH, MORTON, held Acteens Day Dec. 6. Participants made a Christmas decoration for the residents of Mississippi Care Center in Morton.



The Mission Kids of **LEESBURG CHURCH, MORTON**, put labels on moon pies for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and made Christmas cards for the homeless ministry.

In other Church News:

► **First Church, Runnelstown**, will host The Primitive Quartet in concert Jan. 2, 7 p.m. Love offering.

Advisors: Take time to find reputable charity

NASHVILLE (BP) — With many in the U.S. expected to give more money to charities this Christmas season, financial experts are advising a biblically based, focused, and well-educated approach to charitable giving.

Christians should be careful to give their gifts to charities that have proven to be responsible stewards of God's resources, said William Townes, Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee vice president for convention finance in Nashville.

"Due to the plethora of giving opportunities to deserving organizations, a well-reasoned approach to Christian giving should be both biblical in disposition and responsible in implementation," Townes told Baptist Press. "Some principles to encourage responsible giving are to ensure that any potential recipients of your generosity align with your personal beliefs, provide strong fiscal accountability, and are efficiently and effectively carrying out their stated mission."

Charitable giving to churches and nonprofit organizations affiliated with the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountabil-



ity (ECFA) has increased annually since 2011, the council reported, and is poised to continue rebounding from the 2008 recession.

Townes predicts what he terms the "perfect giving storm," a season of increased giving accompanied by numerous charities competing for newly available dollars.

December 2014 could result in rebounding charitable giving, Townes said, "due to the abatement of individual economic dysphoria, new highs in the stock market, year-end tax incentives, increased discretionary income

as a result of reduced fuel prices, lower unemployment figures, and most importantly the spirit of the Christmas season."

As a result, "intentional, occasional, and even random givers may give above and beyond what they have given in the past," Townes said.

Jason Allen, president of Southern Baptists' Midwestern Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., offered advice from the viewpoint of both the recipient and the giver, writing in a blog that Christians should give first to their local church.

"Though I lead a theological institution dependent upon the generous donations of God's people," he wrote at jasonkallen.com, "my wife and I prioritize our local church and encourage others to do the same."

"In the New Testament, we see by prescription and by pattern God's people giving to their local church," Allen wrote. "The Apostle Paul repeatedly instructed and celebrated this pattern."

Be fully informed about available giving options and the proven stewardship of recipients, Allen advised.

"Be on the lookout both for what [charities] don't state publicly as well as what they do. As a donor, no question should be off-limits. There are too many great Christian ministries with pressing needs, to settle for making ill-informed contributions."

Be wary of groups that continually engage in crisis fundraising, Allen warned. "Every Christian entity faces seasons of unusual need or unanticipated challenges. But if any entity perennially engages in crisis fundraising, odds are they do not have a donor problem; they have

a business-model problem. Be leery about throwing good money after bad."

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS), on its website irs.gov, counsels to be alert to IRS regulations regarding tax deductions and plan gifts for the greatest tax savings.

Gifts to all churches are tax-deductible, but contributors must itemize their taxes to deduct contributions. The IRS lists on its website all additional charities and agencies eligible to receive tax-deductible gifts.

Follow your heart when making donations, Townes advises, pointing to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions as a favorite.

"For many Southern Baptists, their affinity and giving through their local church allows them to fulfill both the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, allowing their passion to be aligned with their giving to an accountable organization which has proven their ability to accomplish their mission," Townes said. "The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering is one such example of an incredibly effective way to reach the world with the Gospel."

OFFERING

cont. from p. 1

of his support, I scheduled a meeting with three ladies who provide leadership in our WMU. We reviewed both our goals and giving for the past ten years. Upon examining our records, we were reminded that we failed to reach our goal of \$37,000 the previous year. The same goal had been set for 2013. With the permission of these ladies, I increased our 2013 goal from \$37,000 to \$50,000. We concluded our meeting by making plans to promote this special mission offering.

One of our ladies took responsibility for placing posters highlighting our goal at strategic locations in our facilities. Another WMU leader enlisted a guest speaker who works in one of our departments in the Baptist Building. This young lady, whose parents are international missionaries, reminded our members of the importance of this offering. Chinese take-out boxes were purchased and presented to our children's mission groups to be used as their personal collection boxes for the money they planned to give. I prepared and delivered a special sermon about global missions that featured the story of Lottie Moon.

My "Lottie" sermon contained an illustration about a phone call I received the previous Thursday from a mother of a seven-year-old boy. She related how her son came

home from RAs on Wednesday evening with his Chinese take-out box, rushed to his room, and grabbed his piggy bank. When she inquired as to what he was doing, her son declared that he was going to fill his box for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. The two of them sat down and counted the contents of the piggy bank. The total was \$67. When the mom asked how much her son planned to give, he replied, "All of it!" "Are you sure you want to give everything you have?" Mom gently asked. Her son's simple reply was, "Mom, it's for Jesus!"

This young man's legacy of "giving to Jesus" produced dividends as amazing as the little lad who shared his sack lunch with Jesus. His anonymous testimony prompted two brothers to go home, clean out their piggy banks and give half of all the money they possessed to the Lottie Moon Offering. A 50-year-old man came to the church office that same day. The purpose of his visit was to leave his contribution since he would be out of town on the day the offering was scheduled to be received. As he presented his check he said, "Preacher, I have been a member of this church for over 30 years and this is the first time I have ever given to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering." Over the next few days, I was contacted by a widow in our church as well as a prominent businessman. Both confided that if we did not meet our goal to please contact them. Each

was willing to give additional money to insure the goal would be met.

On Sunday morning, December 15, people were invited to come forward and place their gifts in "Lottie's Trunk" (an old trunk similar to the one Lottie Moon may have used to transport her clothing to China). The line was led by preschoolers from our Wee Worship who brought their Chinese take-out boxes filled with money. They were followed by older children and then our youth who sit together at the front of our sanctuary. Young, middle, and senior adults came. "Lottie's Trunk" became more and more filled as people continued to place their gifts inside it.

After the worship hour concluded, the contents of Lottie's Trunk were transported to a local bank. Since there were piles of coins as well as checks and cash, it took our designated counters, with assistance from all the available bank tellers, several hours on Monday to count the money. The amount of the offering was kept confidential. The following Sunday our church was filled with people who were eager to hear if we reached our goal. The grand total I had the privilege to announce and to display on our video screens was \$225,365.40.

That was not bad for a church that had entered the Week of Prayer for International Missions with an original goal of \$37,000. To God be the glory!

Submission Guidelines

The Baptist Record is pleased to publish news and photographs of special events that take place in cooperating churches of the Mississippi Baptist Convention. News items and/or photographs depicting benefits and activities for secular or outside organizations will not be published.

Preferred method: news may be submitted electronically to the e-mail address below, and must be included in the message segment of an e-mail form. Secondary method: news may be typewritten or neatly printed on 8 1/2 by 11-inch paper and mailed. All articles must be received in writing; no articles will be accepted over the telephone. Due to ever-present virus threats, no text attachments will be accepted. Photograph attachments in JPEG format are permissible.

Please make articles concise. Include the who, what, when, where details of the story, along with a contact person's address and telephone number.

Photographs must be submitted electronically via e-mail, as attachments in JPEG format. Hard copy photographs mailed through the postal service will not be accepted. Photographs must be clear, sharp, and well-lighted. Photographs must depict people. No landscape, building, or object-only photographs will be printed. Photographs containing inappropriate gestures and objectionable clothing will not be published. Cell phone photographs and other low resolution items that do not reproduce well on newsprint are generally not publishable.

There is no guarantee that news items and/or photographs will be published, and unsolicited material will not be acknowledged or returned. All news items are subject to editing, and all photographs are subject to cropping. News items and/or photographs can be published one time only. Deadline for submitting news is one week prior to requested publication date. Articles that are not date-sensitive will be published on a space-available basis. These guidelines are not meant to be exhaustive.

Submit news to The Baptist Record, P.O. Box 530, Jackson, MS 39205-0530. FAX: (601) 292-3330. E-mail: baptistrecord@mbcb.org.

HRC

cont. from p. 1

with more than \$166,000 in "non-money contributions." The ordinance was based on model legislation from HRC, according to the newspaper.

The Arkansas state director of HRC said her organization remains certain that "the progress of fairness will continue despite this result." HRC will "keep up the fight" for "true equality," Kendra Johnson said in a written statement.

HRC has also opened an office in Mississippi, where they have set aside \$310,000 for a Baptist-specific project named, "All God's Children." The goal of the project, which the HRC national website describes as a "public education campaign," is to "strengthen the founda-

tion of public support for LGBT Mississippians."

Local and national Southern Baptist leaders opposed the Arkansas ordinance largely because of concerns it would infringe upon the freedoms of religion and conscience for individuals, churches, and businesses.

The ordinance's repeal "represents a victory for religious freedom," said Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission in Nashville.

Ron Lomax, director of missions for Washington Madison Association in Fayetteville, said, "We are very happy with the outcome of the vote to repeal. It was a bad law and one which was passed by our city council despite what the majority of the city wanted."

PLATT

cont. from p. 2

missions. IMB exists to help pastors fan a flame for God's global glory in every local church.

Throughout the New Testament we see churches sending missionaries, and we want to come alongside churches in order that they might do the same. Then, as churches send missionaries, the IMB exists to help the local church shepherd these brothers and sisters who are serving on the global mission field. We want to help churches care for their missionaries spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and physically.

The force of over 40,000 churches working together specifically to take the Gospel to unreached peoples is a powerful picture, to say the least! As churches send and shepherd missionaries to make disciples and multiply churches around the world, we begin to realize God's plan for making His glory known among the nations.

Completing Great Commission

All of the above means that the goal of the IMB is clear: We want to be a part of the accom-

plishment of the Great Commission. With tens of thousands of churches, we can play a significant part of reaching every single unreached people group with the Gospel.

I long to see this reality. I live to see this reality. I would love to be part of the generation that ultimately sees all nations reached with the Gospel. Yet if I don't see that day in my lifetime, I want to die trying.

As breathtaking as Southern Baptists' mission work has been through the years, I'm convinced that God has so much more for us. This is a critical time for the Southern Baptist Convention and for IMB, but let's be clear. We are not fighting for the survival of our convention or our missions agencies. No, we're fighting for the day when IMB is needed no more because disciples have been made and churches have been multiplied in every nation.

Praying, giving

During this season of concentrated giving for international missions, a force of nearly 16 million Baptists has the opportunity to petition God with requests related to specific missionaries around the world, and to give to increase that force of missionaries serving in the world. When

you pray for specific missionaries, you are pleading to God for the people without Christ whom they will encounter.

Further, when you give through the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions, you are fueling and sustaining a missions movement with eternal ramifications. This is a mission worth praying for, and this is a mission worth giving to.

Let's join together to exalt Christ as we work together to complete His Great Commission. Let's ask the people around us, "Will you join me in this effort to reach the unreached with the Gospel in order that they might hear the Gospel, believe it and give God the glory due Him?"

Let's ask ourselves, "With the individual gifts God has given me, how can I mobilize more people to be more engaged in praying, giving, and going for the sake of global mission?"

May God use your church, your life, and our partnership together in the Gospel to reach the nations in the days ahead for the glory of His great name!

Platt became IMB president on August 27. His commentary appears courtesy of Baptist Press. For information about getting involved in global mission, visit imb.org/now.

YOUTH EVANGELISM CHALLENGE
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BILLBOARDS

cont. from p. 1

American Atheists President David Silverman said according to the release. "Enjoy the time with your family and friends instead. Today's adults have no obligation to pretend to believe the lies their parents believed. It's OK to admit that your parents were wrong about God, and it's definitely OK to tell your children the truth."

Memphis resident Eric Hart raised enough money to purchase a competing digital billboard in his city that reads, "Dear Santa, All I want for Christmas is to keep it sacred without being bullied. Peace, dignity, and respect for all," Deseret News reported. The American Atheists responded with new billboards in Memphis and Nashville Dec. 5 reading, "Dear Christians, I share my toys. Why won't you share the season? Happy holidays for all!"

Coppenger said the freedom to erect such billboards is part of "the glory of America." He invited observers to judge for themselves whether the atheist or Christian message is more compelling.

"Those of us in apologetics find some challenges more daunting than others," Coppenger said, "but when these billboards go up, they just seem so lame and I take some encouragement from that. Put your wares up there, and then let society judge."

The past two years, the American Atheists have purchased similar billboards in New York City's Times Square. Other billboards sponsored by the group date back to at least 2010, the Washington Post reported.

Silverman said atheist persecution by Christians is one reason his group must stand against religious holiday traditions.

"Millions of American children are forced to go to church under the threat of being denied meals, losing household privileges, having their college tuition cut off, or being kicked out of their homes," Silverman said. "Many atheist adults are forced to go to church under threat of divorce or lose custody of their children. We must ask the question, who are the real bullies? Those who are afraid to stand up for our views on billboards, or those who destroy families from the inside out?"

Coppenger hopes atheist billboards have a "bracing effect for Christians" and help dispel the myth that everyone in the Bible Belt is a follower of Jesus.

"Some people think that by just living in the South you're saved," Coppenger said, but atheist billboards "draw sharper lines. They show there is a contrast between Christianity and secularism and these people are serious. So you're cast upon the task of asking, 'Am I serious?' There really is a difference, and so I need to know whether I'm on the right side of the line."

Rob Phillips, leader of the Missouri Baptist Convention's apologetics ministry, said the billboard campaign is a "great opportunity" to show that "atheism is a belief system, not a proven fact." He critiqued an American Atheists spokeswoman's statement that what "religious people" believe "is not true."

"How does she know that?" Phillips, who also serves as the Missouri convention's commu-

nications team leader, told BP in email comments. "What evidence can she produce to prove that God does not exist? Has she thoroughly and objectively examined all the evidence that supports the possibility of a divine designer - from cosmological arguments to the existence of universal moral standards?"

"The simple truth is that when atheists proclaim as fact that there is no God, they are blind to their own beliefs. As Christian apologists Norman Geisler and Frank Turek are famous for saying: 'I don't have enough faith to be an atheist,'" Phillips said.

Ken Ham, founder of Answers in Genesis, called it ironic that "these billboards are pressuring kids to skip church because they're 'too old for fairy tales,' but they seem to have no problem with kids writing letters to Santa Claus, an obviously mythical character."

"Ultimately why do atheists care what our children, or their parents, believe?" Ham wrote in a blog post. "After all, if there really is no God and death is the absolute end, why does it even matter what anyone believed during their time on Earth? According to atheism, once you die, that's it - it's over. What a hopeless, purposeless message!"

"[The] message of Christ offers real hope and purpose," Ham wrote. "Jesus Christ came to Earth, lived a perfect life, and died on the Cross to take the penalty of death that we deserve because of our sin upon Himself. Three days later He rose again and now offers eternal life! The message of the Bible is a message of hope, and it is truth."

God Provides a Savior • Luke 2:8-20

"Where were you when (Insert Event)?" In a lifetime, few national or global events ever "grip" us; not only disrupting our routine but also defining us. Headliners like the bombing of Pearl Harbor or assassination of JFK or September 11 so "impress" ("to mark by or as if by pressure or stamping") us that we always remember where we were and what we were doing when we first heard the news.

For shepherds "abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (2:8, KJV), the birth of Jesus could not have been more memorable: an angel of the Lord appeared (2:8-12), the glory of the Lord radiated (2:9), and the heavenly host praised (2:13-14). The shepherds were told the "good news" (2:10) first; then, they became an integral part of the greatest story ever told (2:15-20). Only Luke records their role in it.

1. The Good News is for all the people.

The angel of the Lord declared, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger" (2:10-12, NASB). That birth announcement was both personal ("you") and universal ("for

all the people"). The shepherds were the intended audience, in accordance with God's age-old plan (See Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8). Hence, the Greek pronouns, translated "you," are plural, comparable to the Southern "y'all."

God drafting the shepherds proved that the good news pertained to all people because entrusting such a message to them would have raised eyebrows in the first century. The rabbis despised shepherds as much as tax collectors, adding them to a list of "thieving and cheating" occupations. Therefore, one could not buy wool, milk, or a kid (young goat) from a shepherd because the assumption was that it had been stolen (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. VI, 488-89).

2. The Good News refers to a Person, not just an event.

The typical birth announcement celebrates the birth as much as the baby. The reason is that the parents, although quite proud, do not know what their newborn son or daughter will become.

What the angel of the Lord announced to the shepherds was anything but typical. The birth had been remarkable (See Mt. 1:18-25; Lk. 1:26-38; Phil. 2:5-7), but who the baby was and what the baby would do mattered more. The announcement contained three insightful titles, "Savior," "Christ," and "Lord." "Christ" (humanity) and "Lord" (divinity) revealed who the baby was: Immanuel ("God with us"). "Christ," which means "anointed one," is the Greek equivalent of "messiah," a Hebrew noun. "Savior" divulged what the baby would do (See Mt. 1:21; Phil. 2:8).

ing for the consolation of Israel" (2:25, NASB), the shepherds could not have been more flabbergasted: literally, "feared a great fear" (2:9). After regaining their composure, however, they did respond appropriately. Luke wrote, "They came in haste and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby" (2:16, NASB).

This good news never becomes "old news." Hence, it still elicits a response, but the response can be disappointing. When Mary heard what the shepherds reported, she "treasured up all [those] things, pondering them in her heart" (2:19, NASB). The Greek verb translated "ponder" conveys continuous action because it is a participle. Others who had heard the shepherds testify were not as receptive (2:18). The Greek verb, translated "wonder" or "be amazed" (NIV) or "marvel" (its translation elsewhere in the New Testament), is not a synonym for "faith" (See Mt. 21:20-22; Lk. 4:22; 24:12, 41; Jn. 3:7; 5:28; 7:15, 21; Acts 13:41).

God only rewards those who respond appropriately to this good news. Consequently, the heavenly host specified, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased" (2:14, NASB).

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Explore the Bible

with Ivan Parke

3. The Good News changes people.

From verse 8 to verse 20, readers can track an incredible progression. The shepherds became worshipers, praising God just like the heavenly host (compare 2:13-14 and 2:20). They also became witnesses (2:17-19), after being eyewitnesses (2:16-17). Each transformation happened quickly, attesting to the quality of the good news (Rom. 1:16-17).

Unlike Simeon who had been "look-

The Shelter of God's Forgiveness • Psalm 32:1-7

"...So you trusted in the Lord and you took her as your wife But the forgiveness that you gave would be given back to you Because you carried in your heart what she was holding in her womb... Forgiveness is a miracle, the miracle... And a miracle will change your world" Excerpt (from the song "Forgiveness Is A Miracle (A Song for Joseph)/Man of Mercy" by vocalist and songwriter, Jason Gray.

David, "a man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22; ESV), knew the miracle of God's forgiveness. Before studying Psalm 32, take time to read 2 Samuel 11-12. Next read Psalm 51. Notice David's plea for forgiveness: "wash me, cleanse me, my sin is ever before you, purge me with hyssop, and hide your face from my sins." Then David cries out, "Create in me a clean heart O God, and take not your Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51:10). David experienced forgiveness when he had a broken and contrite heart (51:16-17). "Brokenness is not an emotion. Brokenness is a humble and obedient response to the conviction of God's Spirit. When we are broken, the very life of God flows from us and affects those around us" (The Broken Life by www.LifeAction.org).

This Psalm is a Maskil, a psalm of instruction. David comes before us as teacher, one who has personally experi-

enced and learned a valuable lesson. Human nature tends to heed the advice of one who has been there, done that. John MacArthur comments, "The overall thrust, intent, and development of Psalm 32 may be summarized as follows: Life's most important lessons about sin, confession and forgiveness are skillfully shared by David through two avenues of approach. They are: Remembering These Lessons (32:1-5) and Relaying These Lessons (32:6-11)."

First, it is essential we have a good understanding of the use of the words: blessing, forgiveness, and sin. The word blessing means:

oh the happiness, having inner peace and freedom... As you study notice there is the blessing of a clean conscience (32: 1-2),

of knowing God is our refuge (32:6-7), receiving His instruction (32:8-9), and experiencing great joy in Him (32:10-11).¹ When we confess our sins (agreeing with God about our sin, not denying sin) we are found not guilty. Think about standing before a judge, awaiting your sentence, and with the stroke of the gavel you are

declared free-the blessing. At the end of this Psalm David counsels the reader to be glad, rejoice, and shout for joy (32:8-11).

The next word is "sin" and there are three key Hebrew words used in this passage: "TRANSGRESSION" (Hb. Pasha, "rebellion")—asserting your will in direct opposition to God's will; SIN (Hb. Chata'ah, "missing the mark; misstep"); and SIN (Hb. 'awon, "iniquity, moral crookedness, perversion; wrong-doing"). The usage of this threefold terminology signifies completeness and indicates a degree of deliberateness on the part of the offender.

David realized how completely sin had separated him from God.² Sin is destructive both physically (32:3-4) and psychologically.

cally. If sin could be classified, the number one sin would be pride and from this one sin we slide down into the abyss. Pride tells us we have no need of God, this is a lie (Genesis 3). There is a saying, "Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay and cost you more than you want to pay."

The final word is "forgiveness." "FORGIVEN" (Hb. Nasa, "pardon") pictures sin as a burden, that is lifted up and carried away. COVERED (Hb. kasha) signifies the covering over or atonement of sin so that it will never be seen again. DOES NOT CHARGE (Hb. Chasav, "reckon" or "account") emphasizes forgiveness as cancellation of a debt or erasing of sin from God's record book.² Because of God's grace and mercy, we find complete forgiveness. When we repent of our sin, choosing to trust Christ instead of following our own way, we become even more aware of the depths of His faithful love. Here we experience restoration and joy.

Do you acknowledge the specifics of your sin or do you generalize? Sin is what separates us from our relationship with Christ, but today could be the day you experience the shelter of God's forgiveness. It takes courage to be honest with God about our sin. Run to Him; hide under His care, and sing "Joy to the world, forgiveness has come!"

Daily Dwell on the Word: 1 John 1:9-10
¹©1993, Steven J. Cole, <http://bible.org/seriespage/psalm-32-blessings-for-forgiveness>

²©2001, Women's Evangelical Commentary, Old Testament, by Patterson & Kelley, page 911

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Bible Studies for Life

with Laura Leathers



God Ordains Restoration • Ezra 3:1-7, 10-11; 6:19-22

Context

In 539 BC, when conquering Babylon, Persia gained lands as well as peoples, including Jews whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken captive (2:1-65). Cyrus was the victorious Persian king. Flexing his muscles, he promptly rescinded Babylonian policies; in part, he issued an edict that ended the Jewish exile (1:1-4; 6:1-5), fulfilling what Jeremiah had prophesied (Jer. 25:1-14). That edict, an excerpt from the Cyrus Cylinder, can be seen today at the British Museum.

The Book of Ezra mentions four kings of Persia whose reigns spanned 135 years: Cyrus (559-530 BC), Darius (522-486 BC), Ahasuerus (486-465 BC), and Artaxerxes (465-424 BC). Ezra lived when Artaxerxes ruled. Consequently, the Jewish "priest [and] scribe" (7:11; 21) does not appear in the Book of Ezra until chapter seven.

Connection

Before Israel entered the land of Canaan, Moses admonished them, "If your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You shall not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it" (Dt. 30:17-18, NASB). The Israelites did not heed his warning, a recurring tragedy that God anticipated (Dt. 31:14-21).

Before Israel entered the land of Canaan, Moses also assured them, "You shall be left few in number among the nations, where the Lord shall drive you. But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul. For the Lord your God is a compassionate God. He will not fail you" (Dt. 4:27, 29, 31, NASB). God, anticipating their rebelliousness, prepared Israel's restoration in advance (Dt. 30:1-10).

The Book of Ezra records Israel's restoration, a second chance; what Ezra, in his prayer, rightly

called "grace" or "favor" (9:8, RSV and ESV). God "stirred" a pagan ruler to set the Jewish captives free (1:1). As amazing is the fact that their freedom cost them nothing because they didn't do anything to get it: begging or bribing, protesting or revolting.

Chapter two lists the Jewish returnees (See Neh. 7), but it isn't the last chapter because grace is never the end of a story. It's only the beginning of much more to come. Back in their homeland, God's people resumed full

worship (3:1-6; 6:19-22) and rebuilt the temple (3:7-13; 5:1-5; 6:14-18).

Content

1. A second chance is never better than obedience the first time.

In the very prayer that Ezra expressed gratitude for grace, he acknowledged, "Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to plunder and to open shame. For we are slaves; yet in our bondage,

our God has not forsaken us, but has extended loving-kindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem" (9:7, 9, NASB). Sin, though forgiven, still has consequences. God's people had become a "remnant" (9:8, 13-15), considerably less than "sand on the seashore" (Gen. 22:17; 1 Kg. 4:20) or "stars in the heavens" (Gen. 22:17; Ex. 32:13).

After the foundation of the second temple had been laid, the priests and Levites led a spirited celebration. Bitter tears, however, tainted the rejoicing (3:7-13; See also Neh. 8:1-12) because the elderly could recall the "good old days." Sin can be forgiven, but regrets cannot be forgotten.

2. Obedience is difficult every time. American novelist Thomas Wolfe wrote *You Can't Go Home Again*. When God's people did return, they didn't recognize home. They weren't politically independent and the peoples of the land outnumbered them (3:1-3). As a result, rebuilding the temple would be an epic struggle. The peoples of the land manipulated Darius to delay construction (4:1-5; 4:24-5:17). God countered with two prophets, Zechariah and Haggai, to jumpstart the work (5:1-2; 6:14-15).

Conclusion

God, through the prophet Joel, promised, "I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten" (2:25, ESV). Nevertheless, the scars that precede every restoration are reasons enough to obey God the first time every time.

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Explore the Bible

with Ivan Parke

The Shelter of God's Encouragement • Psalm 42:1-3, 6-8; 43:3-5

Psst . . . I have something special for you. It is a gift. I'll give you a hint regarding what is inside: it is something you have always wanted and need every day. Carefully you remove the ribbon, then the paper. Slowly you lift the lid from the box. Inside there is a piece of aged parchment with the word "paraclete" written in big bold letters. The word means, encourager, one who comes along beside us to strengthen and help. The gift of encouragement!

David, the Psalmist, knew what it was like to be in turmoil and depression. Where did he go when he needed someone to help him in the midst of his trouble? . . . David encouraged himself in the LORD his God" (1 Sam. 30:6). The Apostle Paul also sought the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3-7). Our lesson today reminds us that no matter what we are facing God is our encourager.

Many scholars believe Psalm 42 and 43 went together originally. This is also a Miskil and it is a Psalm to be sung by the sons of Korah (2 Chron. 20:19). Notice the phrase found in 42:5, 11 and 43:5: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." But when it is being read, a different tone with each refrain is to be applied. There is a tone of dejection and then it progresses

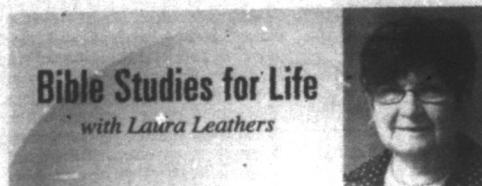
into a position of confidence. If this were being sung, imagine the choir director leading choir to start softly and build up to a loud crescendo.

This psalm deals with a season of darkness or depression. Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote a book titled *Spiritual Depression*, based upon this scripture. Note how many times the phrase "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" When our soul is cast down it is difficult to look up with hope. This is the reason why we have to take every

thought captive and dwell on the Truth (2 Cor. 10:5). John Piper states there are six ways the Psalmist responds to the season of darkness: "He asks God why (vs 9). He affirms God's sovereign love (vs. 8). He sings (vs 8). He preaches to his own soul (vs 5). He remembers past experiences (vs 4) and He thirsts for God (vs 1-2)" (Desiring-God.org).

"As the deer pants...so my soul

pants" and "my soul thirsts for God". The Psalmist is experiencing divine drought. What is divine drought? Is it a long period without a word from God because of unconfessed sin or is it an absence of a daily quiet time and Bible study? A divine drought may occur because God has allowed circumstances into our lives which make no sense, leaving us feeling abandoned. However an insatiable thirst for God may occur because He is drawing us to depend upon Him during this season of darkness.



Bible Studies for Life

with Laura Leathers

In the first three verses the psalmist is experiencing drought, but in verses 6-8 the psalmist is drowning. Everything is coming in on top of him. He has gone from my soul thirsts to my soul is in despair, "all Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me." Depression has set in and it can become a drowning experience. As the waves are rolling over him he comes up for air and breathes this prayer:

"the Lord will command His loving-kindness in the daytime; and His son will be with me in the night." Remember God is always at work in our lives for His purposes and glory. He promises never to forsake us (Heb. 13:5).

"O send out your light and your truth let them lead me . . . to Your dwelling places" (43:6). Light always dispels the darkness and His Truth sets us free. We are to trust God's guidance because we know He is the source of our hope. The Apostle Paul reminds us we are to give thanks in all things (1 Thess. 5:18) and as we do our confidence builds and the ability to joyfully praise God will increase. Notice how the psalmist was moved from a reference to "the living God" (42:2) to "the God of my life" (42:8) to finally, "God, my greatest joy" (43:4). As the psalmist's view of God (and his relationship with Him) changes, his outlook on life and his circumstances also changes (Lifeway SS Resources).

Our greatest encouragement, Jesus Christ is sitting at the right hand of God making intercession for us (Heb. 7:25).

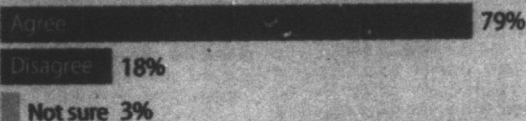
Daily Dwell on the Word: Zephaniah 3:17

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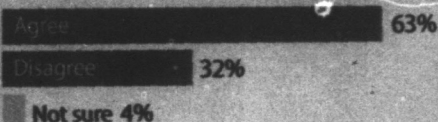
Survey: Americans OK with Christmas traditions

Among Americans:

Christmas should be more about Jesus.



Christmas activities should include a visit to a church service.

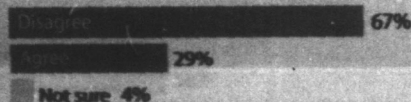


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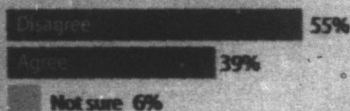
LifeWay
RESEARCH

Among Americans:

It is offensive when people say "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas."



It is offensive when people say "X-mas" instead of "Christmas."



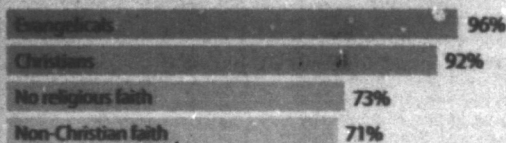
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RESEARCH

Among Americans:

Children in public schools should be allowed to sing religious Christmas songs in school-sponsored programs.

Percent who agree with above statement, by faith groups:



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RESEARCH

NASHVILLE (BP) — Most Americans believe Christmas goes better with a visit to church, religious Christmas songs in public school concerts, and more focus on Jesus, a LifeWay Research survey shows.

While there's much banter on cable TV talk programs about a war on Christmas, most Americans are fine when people wish them Happy Holidays, according to the study.

This year's latest controversy regarding Christmas involves atheist billboards featuring a fictional letter from a little girl who says she's too old for fairy tales. "Dear Santa," the billboard reads, "All I want for Christmas is to skip church."

No thanks, say most of the 1,000 Americans surveyed by telephone Sept. 26 - Oct. 5.

Scott McConnell, vice-president of Nashville-based LifeWay Research, noted "Christmas traditions that have nothing to do with the Christian faith continue to multiply. Still, most Americans want more of Jesus in their Christmas rather than less." Among the findings:

■ **Church remains an essential part of Christmas.** Sixty-three percent of Americans agree Christmas should include a trip to church. Thirty-two percent disagree, while four percent are unsure. Younger Americans are least interested in church at Christmas time. Thirty-eight percent of those ages 18-24 say church is an essential part of Christmas, followed by 55% of those ages 25-34. Christians (77%) are more likely to agree than those from other faiths (44%) and the Nones (28%).

■ **Americans prefer the sacred to the secular at Christmas.** Eight out of 10 Americans agree with the statement, "Christmas should be more about Jesus." Eighteen percent disagree. A few (three percent) are not sure. Southerners (86%) are more likely to agree than Midwesterners (76%) and those in the West (69%). Older Americans are more interested in focusing on Jesus at Christmas than younger Americans. Nearly nine in 10 Americans who are over 65 agree. Among those ages 18-24, the number drops to six in 10.

■ **Americans want to keep Christ in Christmas.** Younger people aren't so sure. Seven in 10 Americans believe "Christmas would be a better experience if it had a more Christian focus." One in four disagree, while four percent are not sure. Seventy-three percent of women agree and 66% of men agree. Younger Americans ages 18-24 (46%), and 25-34 (57%) are less likely to agree than those ages 35-44 (70%) and 65-plus (83%).

■ **Americans want to let school kids sing Silent Night.** Most Americans (86%) say children in public schools should be allowed to sing religious Christmas songs in school-sponsored musicals. Twelve percent disagree. Two percent are not sure. Nine in 10 women and eight in 10 men agree. So do most Westerners (80%) and even more of those in the Northeast (90%) and South (88%). Most younger Americans ages 18-34 (80%) agree, as do 90% of those ages 35 and older. Even many Nones — those who claim no religious faith — don't seem to mind religious Christmas songs in school. Seventy-three percent of Nones agree school kids should be allowed to sing religious songs in Christmas concerts. So do most Christians (92%), almost all Evangelicals (96%), and even those from other faiths (71%).

■ **Most people are fine with Happy Holidays.** One of the staples of the war on Christmas debates is the fact that some

Survey Methodology

The phone survey of Americans was conducted Sept. 26 - Oct. 5. The calling utilized Random Digit Dialing. Sixty percent of completes were among landlines and 40% among cell phones. Maximum quotas and slight weights were used for gender, region, age, ethnicity, and education to more accurately reflect the population. The completed sample is 1,000 surveys. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.5%. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups. Those labeled Evangelicals consider themselves "a born again, evangelical, or fundamentalist Christian." Those labeled Christian include those whose religious preference is Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, or Non-denominational Christian.

store clerks and businesses have substituted Happy Holidays greetings for Merry Christmas, but few Americans seem to mind hearing Happy Holidays. Twenty-nine percent agree with the statement, "It is offensive when people say Happy Holidays instead of Merry Christmas." Sixty-seven percent disagree. Four percent are not sure. Forty-one percent and about 35% say the phrase is offensive. That drops to 20% for people of other faiths, and 11% for Nones.

■ **Some people are bothered by X-mas.** Using the term X-mas in place of Christmas concerns Americans more than Happy Holidays. Thirty-nine percent say using X-mas is offensive. Fifty-five percent disagree, while six percent are not sure. Women (43%) are more likely to be offended by X-mas than men (36%), and more than half of Americans ages 55-64 (52%) are offended by X-mas. Younger Americans don't seem to mind X-mas. Eighteen percent of those ages 18-24, and a 35% of those ages 25-34 find the phrase offensive.

About a quarter of Hispanic Americans say using X-Mas is offensive. Whites (44%) are more likely to find the phrase offensive, as are African Americans (39%). Forty-seven percent of Christians say they agree, along with 32% of people of other faiths. Only 19% of Nones are bothered by X-mas. Meanwhile, more Protestants (51%) than Catholics (37%) take offense.

■ **Theology remains a bit shaky, even at Christmas.** Traditional Christian theology based on the Gospel of John teaches Jesus existed with God the Father at the beginning. "He was with God in the beginning," says John 1:2. However, Americans aren't so clear about the details of the incarnation and the Trinity. Fifty-six percent agree with the statement, "God's son existed before Jesus was born in Bethlehem." Twenty-nine percent disagree. Fifteen percent are not sure. Those living in the Northeast (64%) are more likely to agree than those in the Midwest (44%) or West (52%). Young Americans are less likely to agree Christ existed prior to His birth. About half of those ages 18-44 agree, but that number jumps to nearly two-thirds for those over 44 years of age. Evangelicals (70%) have the highest agreement. Christians (64%) are more likely to agree than those from other faiths (52%) and the Nones (31%).

"The entire Christian narrative is fulfilled in Jesus further humbling himself to become obedient to the point of death on a cross," McConnell said. "Without Jesus coming to take the punishment for sin men deserved, there would be no point to celebrating His birth."